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Sport and UK soft power: The case of Mount Everest

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Abstract

Sport is widely acknowledged as an important contributor to the United Kingdom's soft power resources. This article aims to broaden and deepen our understanding of sport and soft power in the United Kingdom through a case study of British expeditions to, and the eventual conquest of, Mount Everest. Based on original archival research, the article demonstrates that British state institutions intervened systematically and strategically to expedite, and massage the story of, the ascent of Everest to burnish British prestige and present a favourable image to the world. In doing so, the article provides evidence that sport has been intrinsic to the United Kingdom's diplomatic repertoire and soft power assets for considerably longer than existing accounts discern. Moreover, the Everest case offers important cues for contemporary policymakers. In particular, it demonstrates the need for the United Kingdom to project a clear, credible and consistent image if it is to profit from its soft power resources.

Keywords

international prestige, mega-events, Mount Everest, public diplomacy, soft power, sport

Introduction

On the morning of 29 May 1953 two men, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, inched their way up Mount Everest's southeast summit ridge. Their successful ascent marked the climax of over 30 years of British expeditions devoted to scaling the world's highest mountain. News of the triumph, breaking felicitously on Queen Elizabeth II's coronation day, was acclaimed worldwide. This apparent serendipity was, to an extent, a coincidence choreographed by the British state in its on-going struggles to squeeze what has become known as 'soft power' (Nye, 1990) from the Everest saga.

Accumulating soft power, the notion that interests in world politics can be advanced by cultivating and projecting a favourable image that attracts others and persuades them to your point of view, is now a central foreign policy objective of most leading states. Few countries illustrate this better than the United Kingdom where the ambition 'to be the leading soft power nation' (HM Government, 2015: 47) is enshrined in the National Security Strategy. References to the concept likewise punctuate the speeches of the

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United Kingdom's political and diplomatic figures (Hunt, 2019; Johnson, 2017), stimulating a spate of studies devoted to detecting and mapping the wellsprings of UK soft power and the techniques through which it can be harnessed. These investigations pinpoint a portfolio of UK soft power assets encompassing British institutions; norms and values; educational establishments; business brands; cultural, creative and broadcasting industries; scientific aptitude; language; and, the main theme of this article, sport (British Council, 2013, 2018: 33–36; Hill and Beadle, 2014; House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence, 2014; Institute for International Cultural Relations, 2017; ResPublica, 2017).

The political science literature conventionally argues that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) 'embrace of sport as an element in its soft power repertoire is both recent and tentative' (Grix and Houlihan, 2014: 584), reaching its apogee with the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. A more exhaustive audit of the writing on sport and politics in the United Kingdom however, encompassing work by historians, sociologists and sports scientists, indicates that attempts by the FCO and its predecessors¹ to profit from sport's soft power potential predate this. Although their interest was intermittent and their attitude ambivalent, this article contributes to the mounting evidence that during the first half of the 20th century the United Kingdom's foreign policymakers haltingly acclimatised to the idea that sport could be appropriated to amplify diplomatic messages.

The retreat of the United Kingdom's hard power after 1945 accentuated the FCO's appreciation of assets such as sport as vehicles to convey messages about Britain to audiences overseas (Beck, 2005). Yet the story of how the United Kingdom's foreign policy establishment sought soft power from winning the race to conquer Mount Everest, arguably the United Kingdom's preeminent postwar sporting feat, has gone untold. At a time when the state's involvement in sporting matters was more 'inadvertent than planned' (Grix et al., 2015: 472), key organs of the United Kingdom's foreign policy machinery were intervening systematically to expedite a British success on Everest. Indeed decades before it was a staple of the political lexicon; British officials were describing the Everest expeditions in language legible to modern scholars and practitioners of soft power. The FCO likewise chaperoned the aftermath of the conquest with the ambition of burnishing the United Kingdom's prestige overseas.

Based on primary documents consulted at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), the British Library (BL) and The National Archives (TNA), this article analyses the British state's attempts to exploit Mount Everest, especially its eventual ascent, for soft power purposes. The article's empirical backbone draws upon official FCO documentation detailing the discussions between those responsible for discharging UK diplomacy in south Asia and their interactions with those overseeing Everest expeditions. Housed in paper form at the BL, the paramount source of interwar data are approximately 400 telegrams, cables, letters, minute papers and notes pertaining to the Everest expeditions contained in the files of the Political and Secret Department of the India Office. The account of the UK government's disposition towards sport, and specifically the Everest expeditions, after 1945 rests chiefly on an examination of around 250 original hard-copy documents accessed at TNA. The overwhelming majority of these files derive from the Foreign Office Political Department with smaller numbers from the War Office and the Cabinet Office. The government documents recounting the diplomatic dance incited by the expeditions were cross-referenced with the RGS Everest Expedition papers. Covering the period from 1918 to 1955, these records encompass the work of the RGS committees that

planned the Everest expeditions and, crucially, their correspondence with the FCO. The collection's size (over 20,000 items in 150 boxes) and, until a current digitisation project is completed, the fact that most pieces are not catalogued at an individual level (Royal Geographical Society (RGS), 1924) make it a more challenging proposition for researchers. The author sifted over 800 items mainly from boxes 59–99 of the collection, which hold hard copies of postwar expedition materials. A smaller tranche of digitalised documents concerning the interwar expeditions were accessed online at the RGS.

The article's contribution is threefold. First, by broadening the literature beyond its current fixation with the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, it refines our understanding of the relationship between sport and soft power in the United Kingdom. Second, it demonstrates that sport has formed part of the FCO's soft power arsenal for considerably longer than existing accounts discern. Finally, despite today's drastically different context, the Everest episode offers important cues to the United Kingdom's contemporary foreign policymakers. In particular, if the United Kingdom is to profit from its soft power resources, it must project a clear, credible and consistent image.

Sport and (soft) power

According to Nye (2008: 94), power 'is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want'. Typically, international relations scholars equate power with material capabilities. The deployment of these 'hard' power resources, for example, military force, helps states to reap their desired objectives by coercing or inducing others to adjust their position. In the 21st century, however, it is largely accepted that states have a complementary suite of intangible 'soft' power assets. For Nye (2004, 2008), culture, institutions, political ideals and foreign policies form the central pillars of a state's soft power. Attraction rather than coercion is the currency of soft power, with these assets converting into power for a state when others admire and wish to emulate their example. States possessing soft power sculpt the preferences of others in ways that make them more amenable to their agenda. In short, soft power is about 'getting others to want what you want' (Nye, 2002: 9).

Some dissenting voices notwithstanding (Li, 2018), soft power is widely acknowledged to wield an important influence over the conduct of world politics. Consequently, attention has switched to divining soft power's foundations and investigating how states can marshal soft power resources. To attract foreign audiences, states must convey to them messages about alluring aspects of their persona. Traditional diplomatic channels are used to communicate with governing elites, but fully mobilising soft power resources also obliges states to engage in 'public diplomacy' aimed at courting directly the citizens of other states (Nye, 2008). Beyond this, as the Everest case study testifies, states buttress their public diplomacy by surreptitiously synchronising the undertakings of civil society actors (Pamment, 2016).

A substantial body of research contends that exhibitions of sporting prowess translate into soft power by signifying the superiority of, and conferring prestige upon, a state's political, economic and social model (Allison and Monnington, 2002; Krueger, 1995; Murray, 2018; Rofe, 2018; Strenk, 1979). These inquiries focus overwhelmingly on contemporary sports mega-events (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Cornelissen, 2010; De Almeida et al., 2014; Grix and Lee, 2013). Because they attract a global spectatorship, the effective staging of, or strong performances in, these sporting extravaganzas enables states to garner soft power by providing a platform to shape positively the preferences of

foreign publics through showcasing attractive aspects of their values, culture and achievements (Grix and Brannagan, 2016: 259; Pigman and Rofo, 2014). These studies yield vital insights about how states capitalise upon sport's soft power potential. Nevertheless, the obsession with mega-events downplays the other avenues states use to wring soft power from sporting ventures (see, for example, Duckworth and Hunt, 2017).

Sport, soft power and the FCO

Research on the relationship between sport and soft power in the United Kingdom exemplifies this preoccupation with mega-events. Some noteworthy interventions aside (see Rofo, 2014, 2018), the United Kingdom's proficiency for gathering soft power from sport is probed almost exclusively through the lens of the 2012 Olympics (Grix and Houlihan, 2014; Houlihan and Giulianotti, 2012). Sport is conspicuously absent from discussions of UK public diplomacy (see, for example, Parsons, 1984), meriting only a passing reference even in the FCO's (2008) collection of essays on the subject. All this appears to corroborate the view that the FCO's deeply ingrained habit of applying hard power to promote the United Kingdom's national interest had relegated sport to the periphery of its diplomatic vision.

Closer scrutiny unmasks a more nuanced picture, however. A farsighted FCO memo penned in 1918 identified the need to 'develop British prestige in all parts of the world and to encourage smaller States to direct their political orientation towards this country' (TNA, 1918: 24). Put another way, auguring discussions about soft power, foreign policy should be directed at wooing others to want what you want. In this context, sport started trespassing on the fringes of the FCO's terrain. Most officials considered sport 'no business of ours' (Polley, 1996), but, from the turn of the century, the FCO was dabbling in sport diplomacy (Jones, 1987; Polley, 1992). These interventions were spasmodic, but there was a dawning perception that international sporting competition could embellish a nation's image and credibility abroad. For instance, England's football team became an essential component of the FCO's bid 'to portray Britain as a nation of justice and fair play and to support diplomatic objectives' (Jones, 1987: 170; see also Beck, 1999). The spectacle of others, most notoriously Nazi Germany's manipulation of the 1936 Olympics, seizing upon sport to advertise the qualities of their political models further sensitised the FCO to its soft power properties. Nonetheless, the FCO's interwar outlook remained circumspect. Incidents such as the Bodyline affair, a breakdown in Anglo-Australian relations deriving from tactics on the cricket field in 1933, reminded officials that sport, as well as presenting opportunities to engender bonhomie and impart an attractive image, could also rouse passions capable of jeopardising painstakingly cultivated diplomatic relationships.

The United Kingdom's hard power wherewithal remained formidable, but its deterioration after 1945 was inescapable. To convince foreign onlookers that the United Kingdom persisted as a major power, the FCO looked to complement material resources with the 'projection of Britain' (TNA, 1952j). Postwar, attempts to disseminate Britain's values became more deliberate and institutionalised. Against this background, FCO officials noted 'the growing tendency of the modern world to attach importance to prowess in sport . . . in this field . . . the State must feel impelled sooner or later to intervene' (TNA, 1948). The FCO's attitude to the 1948 London Olympics was conscientious rather than enthusiastic, but there was a strong emphasis on eliciting a positive response from foreign governments and public opinion, and it sparked further contemplation about how sport

could affirm the United Kingdom's international standing (Beck, 2008). The FCO's previously pragmatic posture towards the Olympics became more structured (Polley, 1992) alongside its fledgling inclination that 'the Olympic Games have immense prestige and offer a unique stage for the demonstration of national prowess' (TNA, 1959). Beyond the Olympics, the FCO deployed sports personalities as informal ambassadors sending Roger Bannister, runner of the first sub-four-minute mile, to the United States at the behest of the British Information Services in 1954. Unfortunately, the FCO's budding curiosity coincided with a paroxysm of sporting fiascos. The English cricket team's loss of the 1948 Ashes series to Australia was followed by the football team's undignified elimination from the 1950 World Cup and the forfeiture of their unbeaten home record to Hungary in 1953. With sport seemingly symbolising the United Kingdom's fading status, the quest for Mount Everest acquired a newfound importance, not least at the FCO that resolved to ensure a British victory.

Mount Everest and soft power before 1945

Himalayan mountaineering originated at the confluence of exploration, with an accent on scientific discovery, and sport, connoting competitive physical activity aimed at subduing an opponent. Initial requests to prospect Everest were couched in terms of 'exploration from a scientific point of view' (BL, 1920a); similarly, the purists believed that infection by the clamour of sporting competition would debase the mountaineering experience. The intensification of the international contest for the Himalayan summits meant sporting subtexts overtook those of exploration with 'the exploits of top mountaineers . . . followed by the general public with an interest second only to soccer' (Isserman and Weaver, 2008: 234). Mountaineering's sporting pretensions became even more pronounced after 1945, with a growing emphasis on selecting and preparing elite teams (Tuckey, 2013). John Hunt, leader of the 1953 expedition, recognised that 'we are inevitably involved in the competition for Everest' (RGS, 1953c), while Tom Bourdillon, a member of the climbing party, opined, 'Everest attempts have become an international competition . . . in which the pleasure of the mountaineer takes second place to national prestige' (RGS, 1952b). Meanwhile, FCO correspondence noted, 'reports that the Russians are attempting to climb the north side of Everest, and . . . the Chinese themselves seem to be going in for mountaineering as a sport at which a first-class power must shine' (TNA, 1956).

Nowadays, successful ascents of Mount Everest seldom make the headlines. Hundreds of mountaineers attain the summit every year, hauled by professional guides up the route pioneered in 1953. This circus of commercial exploitation has robbed the mountain of much of its mystique. Contrastingly, in the decades before the maiden ascent, the hype surrounding Mount Everest was prodigious. Everest expeditions inspired copious media coverage plus a blizzard of books and documentary films that turned the leading protagonists into household names.² After the North and South Poles were reached in 1909 and 1911, respectively, the Himalayan peaks became the final frontier of earthly exploration. Mount Everest, the loftiest of all, was the ultimate trophy, literally and figuratively the pinnacle of human adventure. Some of the United Kingdom's foreign policymakers quickly fathomed Everest's prestige potential, voicing concern that the credit for climbing the mountain, and hence any soft power premium, must not accrue to others. Lord Curzon, Viceroy and Governor-General of India from 1899 to 1905, wrote, 'If we don't do it, explorers of other nationalities will . . . With the prize dangling before our eyes it would in my view be a reproach if alien hands were allowed to snatch it' (RGS, 1906).

All the same, in the century after the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India first calculated the height and whereabouts of the world's highest mountain in 1841, the FCO's demeanour towards Everest paralleled that of sport more generally insofar as prestige and soft power considerations were subservient to strategic (hard power) concerns. Fearful of reigniting tensions in the 'Great Game', a moniker bestowed upon the skirmishes between the British and Russian Empires across central Asia, FCO officials scotched pre-1914 proposals for Everest expeditions. Every available route to Everest involved trekking through Nepal or Tibet, but the British authorities prohibited interference in these countries, which were regarded as a bulwark against threats from Russia and, increasingly, China. In contrast, between 1921 and 1938, British government officials expended extensive diplomatic energy to extract from Tibet permission for seven expeditions coordinated by the Mount Everest Committee (MEC). Furthermore, the archives chronicle how Britain's bureaucrats, despite routinely rejecting requests for direct financial subventions (RGS, 1921a), afforded the expeditions ample material assistance, prompting one commentator to paint them as a 'quasi-official enterprise' (Stewart, 1995: 177). This incorporated the supply of survey parties (BL, 1921c), customs exemptions (BL, 1921a), subsidised transport and clothing (BL, 1921b), and supporting the design and testing of oxygen apparatus (TNA, 1922).

Official cables expose two interrelated reasons for this sudden readiness to aid Everest expeditions. The primary cause was the dramatic alteration in the Asian geo-political calculus occasioned by the fallout from the First World War and the Russian and Chinese revolutions. Internal afflictions diminished Russian and Chinese influence and assuaged opposition among British officials to exploration in the region. Geo-political upheavals are nevertheless only a partial explanation. In negotiating access to Everest, strategic considerations were still uppermost. As the India Office's Political Secretary put it, 'it has always been the policy of this Office to encourage geographical exploration *so far as may be compatible with political exigencies*' (BL, 1920b, emphasis added).³

The secondary cause of the UK state's incipient eagerness was the germination of the sentiment that Everest's conquest would brighten Britain's image overseas. Whereas in 1919 the India Office surmised that 'the results of such a conquest would be largely academic' (BL, 1919), shortly afterwards Everest was being referred to as having 'clearly a national importance' (RGS, 1921b). By 1924, three British expeditions had failed to reach the summit, with the controversies that marred them leading the Tibetans to forbid further access until 1933 (see Unsworth, 2000: Chapter 6). With Swiss and German mountaineers airing their interest, FCO officials machinated to maintain Britain's monopoly on the mountain. Officially, the British position was that the Tibetans chose who would be granted permission. Privately, British officials were anxious about the soft power bounty from Everest falling into rival hands. Therefore, 'we should do nothing to facilitate the transmission of a foreign application until the time is propitious for making a British application' (BL, 1934b). Moreover, 'so far as British official support is concerned the Mount Everest Committee has a claim to priority of consideration over any foreign application' (BL, 1934a). Indian Office bureaucrats also solicited requests from the Committee to 'dispose of any application for facilities for a foreign expedition' (BL, 1924). Curiously, the most explicit expression of Everest's soft power role in government documentation arose from aviation. In 1932, the Air Ministry authorised an RGS mission to fly over Everest, noting the 'Poles have already been reached by aircraft of foreign manufacture makes it all the more important . . . that the greatest geographical objective remaining, namely Mount Everest, should be attained by British endeavour' (BL, 1932). Lord

Clydesdale, one of the operation's pilots, argued, 'the objects of the Expedition are, *first and foremost*, to foster and promote British prestige in India . . . it will do much to dispel the fallacy that this country is undergoing a phase of degeneration' (quoted in Douglas-Hamilton, 1983, emphasis added).

On top of the world

Despite coming very close, and notching up a string of altitude records, Everest's summit eluded Britain's interwar expeditions. A mission that promised to resuscitate Britain's prestige instead seemed to personify its decay. After 1945, the FCO's antennae became even more attuned to Everest's soft power implications. Christopher Summerhayes, the United Kingdom's Ambassador to Nepal, encapsulated this and was a staunch advocate of Everest's value to Britain's attractiveness. Equally, the agitated atmosphere wrought by the retreat of the British Empire and the embryonic Cold War complicated the geo-political and diplomatic intrigues engulfing Everest.

Tibet's closure to outsiders, cemented by China's 1950 invasion, left Nepal, hesitantly opening in the hope of gaining anti-communist allies, as the only feasible route to Everest for Westerners. In 1950, a French expedition entered Nepal and climbed Annapurna, the first 8000-m peak to succumb. The international adulation festooned upon the party and the country bolstered the FCO's view of mountaineering feats as fruitful fountains of soft power but rekindled qualms about a foreign team surpassing the British in the scramble for Everest (RGS, 1951a). Thus, the FCO was amenable to the Himalayan Committee's (the MEC's postwar replacement) petition to approach Nepal for permission to scout Everest's southern flank in 1951. The FCO trod cautiously. Telegraphing Summerhayes in Kathmandu, it counselled 'for general reasons we would like to see the expedition take place, but . . . if in your judgment there is likely to be strong opposition it would of course be a mistake to press it to the point of inviting a rebuff' (TNA, 1951b). In a ploy from the interwar playbook, the FCO also asked that '[S]hould the Nepalese decide against granting permission, I trust it may be possible to ensure that permission is similarly refused to any other applications' (TNA, 1951a). Summerhayes duly delivered and the reconnaissance party, including two New Zealanders,⁴ established the likelihood of a realistic southern route and planning commenced to complete the job in 1952.

The reconnaissance party was still returning when the Nepalese dropped a bombshell, announcing that it had awarded the Swiss permission to climb Everest in 1952. Hastily, the Himalayan Committee made an application via the FCO but to no avail. A torrent of correspondence, often expressing exasperation at presumed Swiss and Nepalese underhandedness, ensued between the FCO in Whitehall, its Asian ambassadors and the RGS.⁵ The reality was more straightforward. In 1939, Lord Zetland, Secretary of State for India and Burma, summarised the India Office's 'general practice in the case of applications to visit Tibet from a foreign Government, is . . . to transmit the application . . . merely acting as a post office and not supporting it' (BL, 1939). The collapse of colonial rule in India ended Britain's Everest stranglehold, as its agents were no longer poised to screen applications. Following the appointment of a new Nepalese Prime Minister, the FCO pressed its case afresh. Meeting with the UK Ambassador and Eric Shipton, putative leader of Britain's 1952 team, the Nepalese refused to abrogate the deal with the Swiss floating instead of the idea of a combined expedition. Summerhayes declared this a 'good solution' (RGS, 1951b) and recommended the Himalayan Committee pursue it with their

Swiss counterparts. A January 1952 minute captures the synthesis of strategy and soft power underpinning the FCO's keenness for this proposal:

(b) we would deprecate making a political issue of climbing Everest and should like to avoid international bickering over it (c) this was especially so where the Swiss were concerned, since our relations with them were in general most friendly and co-operative (d) since (according to Mr Kirwan) the Himalayan Committee agreed that if anyone apart from the British were competent to climb Everest it was the Swiss, the Swiss offer seemed worth looking at carefully; otherwise the Swiss might get up by themselves and beat us to it; (e) if a joint Anglo-Swiss expedition succeeded this spring, the publicity of Shipton's wide Himalayan experience and his own party's original reconnaissance of the route used would make it clear that the success was largely due to the participation of the British. (TNA, 1952c)

To the FCO's chagrin, the Himalayan Committee, after protracted discussions with the Swiss, could not stomach this, opting to apply for 1953 (TNA, 1952a, 1952h) and count on Swiss attempts foundering.

The British climber's prayers were answered. The Swiss came within 800 feet of the summit in May 1952. A second trip in the autumn came to naught, but when they made substantial personnel changes, Summerhayes wanted to protest (TNA, 1952g), asserting, '[M]uch as I deplore any show of jealousy over such an affair . . . I do not see why we should be bounced without a word from our side . . . I am of course very particularly concerned with this one' (TNA, 1952i). His superiors spiked his scheme, suggesting, 'any warning . . . be given through unofficial channels' (TNA, 1952f; see also TNA, 1952b, 1952e). Summerhayes thus contented himself with some low-level espionage in relation to the Swiss forays, endowing John Hunt, newly installed as expedition leader, with useful intelligence.

Relief that the 1953 expedition could proceed was tempered by reports that Nepal had assigned France and Switzerland rights to attempt Everest in 1954 and 1955, respectively. The almost certain knowledge that this was Britain's last chance galvanised state support. Loosely coordinated by the FCO, inputs came from across government. All British Everest expeditions were bankrolled by private patronage and sponsorship, most notably *The Times* newspaper which paid £10,000 for exclusive coverage rights to the 1953 expedition (RGS, 1953f), but the state now stepped in with lavish, if indirect, financial backing. Having received the Treasury's imprimatur, the War Office defrayed the salaries of two of the expedition's serving army officers (TNA, 1952d), provided rations at cost and 'loaned' equipment that Hunt confessed could never be salvaged (TNA, 1953d). The expedition also benefitted from inventions underwritten by Britain's 'warfare state' (Edgerton, 2006). Acute cold and oxygen starvation meant high-altitude mountaineering was a physiological as well as a physical battle. Research directed at military applications produced significant advances in the understanding of human physiology and the protective paraphernalia and artificial aids, most notably supplementary oxygen, to enhance performance in extreme environments. Plenty of the equipment used on Everest in 1953 was designed, refined and tested at the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RGS, 1952a). RGS's (1953b) paperwork conservatively estimates that the bill for the development, manufacture and airlifting of the expedition oxygen sets alone was £12,500: 'the great bulk of this cost has been borne by the Ministry of Supply . . . by the main contractors, Normalair Ltd., and Messrs. Siebe Gorman & Company . . . by the Medical Research Council . . . and by the Royal Air Force'.

Three months after the last of the Everest party departed for base camp, James Morris, *The Times* journalist embedded with the team, hurtled down the Khumbu Glacier with a coded dispatch. This message, betraying the outcome, was relayed to the British Embassy in Kathmandu and onwards to Whitehall where it was decrypted and, after a delay, released to *The Times*. In addition to preventing the newspaper from being ‘scooped’, the FCO’s strict secrecy also ensured that details of Everest’s conquest would not leak before coronation day. British state agencies had consumed considerable diplomatic and financial capital abetting attempts to ascend to the roof of the world. They now coveted a soft power return on their investment.

The Everest ascent as a soft power resource

As the Institute for International Cultural Relations (2017: 4) report confides, soft power’s intangibility makes its magnitude ‘hard . . . to validate empirically’. These problems are more pronounced for historical cases where the proxies used to gauge soft power resources today (see Institute for International Cultural Relations, 2017; USC Centre on Public Diplomacy, 2018) were rudimentary or non-existent. The archival collections do not substantiate hyperbolic claims putting Everest’s reputational impact on a par with Sputnik (Unsworth, 2000: 345) or the ‘moonshot’ (Hoyland, 2013: 40). They do, however, trace the FCO’s systematic attempts to engineer the Everest story and provide qualified support for the argument that this fortified the United Kingdom’s prestige among foreign governments and publics. They also depict how the soft power dividend was partially negated by missteps that aggravated antipathy towards the United Kingdom.

Presaging reflections about sports mega-events, several traits of the Everest story gave it the potential to enrich the United Kingdom’s attractiveness and hence its soft power resources. The climbing of the world’s highest mountain was an epochal moment. The accomplishment, in conjunction with the coronation, shone the spotlight on the United Kingdom, providing an impeccable opportunity to flaunt its image internationally. Winning the international tussle for the summit signalled Britain’s stature and the calibre of its underlying values, culture and institutions. Mass appeal is another theme that Everest shares with sports mega-events. As a mode of social interaction that almost anyone can grasp, sport carries messages that transcend political boundaries. This contention courses through the corpus of Everest writing and the archival documents, not least those whose campaigns bookended the ‘epic of Everest’ (Noel, 2014 [1924]). Everest ambitions were first seriously mooted in 1893 by Francis Younghusband, a British Army officer stationed in Chitral. Later, as RGS President, he mused that ‘the man who first stands on the summit of Mount Everest will have raised the spirit of countless others for generations to come’ (Collie et al., 1921: 15). Heroic failures elevated Everest’s stature in the public psyche ‘as a symbol of the unattainable . . . moved out of the purely mountaineering domain to become a challenge to Man in general’ (Unsworth, 2000: 225). Reflecting on the acclaim accorded to the first ascent, Hunt (1978: 121) argues that ‘in mountaineering history it was accounted as an important milestone . . . In a wider sense, our achievement was seen, as was Gagarin’s in 1960, as a unifying influence which transcended national barriers’.

Climbing Everest was indisputably special, but to convert it into a soft power resource the FCO embarked on a public diplomacy offensive. Nothing insinuates the existence of a prescribed post-Everest public diplomacy strategy, but the archives confirm the FCO’s approach amounted to more than a sequence of uncoordinated responses to one-off

events. Besides scheduling a handful of official engagements, for example, arranging for the climbers to be greeted by the Minister of War at London Airport, the FCO operated predominantly backstage. Instead of intervening directly, the FCO orchestrated and facilitated the work of civil society organisations and their envoys, principally the RGS with whom there was almost continuous dialogue, and quasi-autonomous bodies such as the British Council. Intriguingly, the original documents intimate that the decision to operate this way rested on a realisation, now widely accepted, that soft power and public diplomacy rely on credibility. Crude attempts by state agencies to peddle their image internationally can be received as propaganda that alienates rather than attracts its anticipated audience (Nye, 2004: 107). Ahead of the lecture tours (see below), the RGS (1953h) spoke:

with the Central Office of Information, and with Unilevers, and others; all were agreed that we must have someone to coordinate the whole business . . . British Information Services could do it, but he [The Himalayan Committee Chairman] felt this would be a mistake, as too suggestive of foreign Government propaganda.

To this end, the FCO provided the financial and administrative muscle necessary for expedition emissaries to give lectures and for showings of the official expedition film, *The Conquest of Everest*, in cherished international locations. Himalayan Committee minutes give a flavour of its relationship with the FCO and the factors motivating the lecture and film tour. By October 1953, 'in Europe, lectures had been arranged in France, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia and Switzerland. The Foreign Office would like Greece and Turkey to be included also' (RGS, 1953g). The Committee regularly reminded the FCO of their bid to bathe Britain in a favourable light, writing that 'in organising these lectures, we have had very much in mind their prestige value from a British point of view' (TNA, 1954e) and 'as with the lectures, the prestige value of the film has been stressed with the various distributing agencies' (RGS, 1954c). By the end of 1954, the Everest team had fulfilled over 150 international engagements. Beyond these selected international audiences, the official expedition film had become a global box office success (RGS, 1955). In addition, the RGS (1954d) assisted the British Council to fabricate Everest exhibition sets:

the first set, after touring India for more than a year with great success, was sent by request to Japan . . . over 150,000 people saw the exhibition . . . the second set went to Western Germany . . . it then went to Austria . . . there again the success of the Exhibition was most satisfactory. (RGS, 1954d)

Further displays went to Spain, Portugal, France and Italy, while others toured the Middle East, South America and Africa.

Whether this onslaught of public diplomacy contributed to the United Kingdom's soft power is a more vexed question. The archives leave little doubt that the FCO deemed it a worthwhile exercise, but a succession of snags also hindered its soft power ambitions.

The European lecture series was 'from a prestige point of view, highly successful' (RGS, 1954b). FCO officials wrote to the Himalayan Committee, commending 'your two progress reports on the Everest lectures and related activities, and I would like to congratulate you very warmly on the results being achieved' (RGS, 1954e). The North American lectures 'did a great deal of good for Anglo-American relations' and 'was

fundamentally a great success . . . the Everest adventure has caught the imagination of Americans as of Europeans, and has . . . created much goodwill' (RGS, 1954a). Hunt trumpeted the 'tremendous reception' given to the Everest film: 'I was present in Madrid some weeks ago, where we are not at all popular at present. It was received with tremendous applause – they made me feel very proud' (RGS, 1953d). When illness compelled Hillary to reject invitations to deliver lectures in Berlin and Moscow, Hunt was touted as a substitute, but this would require another leave of absence. Initially, the FCO's 'own tentative feelings at the moment are . . . that the lecture in Moscow would not pay a large enough prestige dividend to justify bringing strong pressure on the War Office to release Hunt' (TNA, 1954c). FCO memoranda reveal how the allure of prestige steadily seduced officials into sending Hunt, especially if the Soviets could be persuaded to make facilities available for a public lecture (see TNA, 1954b, 1954d), whereupon the FCO entreated the War Office to discharge Hunt on the premise that the lectures 'provide a valuable contribution to British prestige' and 'would be of considerable value on political and public relations grounds' (TNA, 1954a). Whatever its other virtues, Hunt's sojourn behind the Iron Curtain and his subsequent visits under British Council auspices nurtured personal contacts between the British and Soviet mountaineering communities (Hunt, 1978). Headed by Hunt, this dimension of public diplomacy 'the development of lasting relationships with key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, trainings, seminars, conferences and access to media channels' (Nye, 2008: 102) is a further Everest legacy. The Himalayan Committee's residual assets became the basis for the Mount Everest Foundation. With a mandate to encourage exploration and research in the world's mountain regions, the Foundation has provided over £1 million to 1600 expeditions mainly comprising multinational parties of young travellers.

Nonetheless, there are clues that Everest's soft power potential was not fully realised. The United Kingdom's foreign policymakers struggled to locate consistent or unifying images around which the Everest narrative could coalesce. This problem was compounded by the propagation of competing soft power storylines by other countries central to the Everest drama. Pigman and Rofo (2014: 1096) argue that 'international sporting competition . . . is an ideal channel for nations, regions, and cities to share their identities, their merits and "brands" with the rest of the world'. For a country to maximise the soft power from its sporting prowess, its story must be made legible to foreign audiences by directing their gaze to particular facets of its values and culture.

Commencing at the height of the United Kingdom's imperial power, the final ascent of Everest coincided with the descent of Empire. Epitomised by the Suez crisis, the Empire's disintegration exposed to the public and politicians the extent of British decline previously camouflaged by its overseas possessions and left the country with a schizophrenic stance towards defining its global role. Some in the FCO clung to the fantasy that Britain's imperial heritage incorporating its 'political genius and her vast experience of Government in widely differing parts of the world [would] continue to provide valuable examples for the people of the world' (TNA, 1952j: 4) and, in parallel with startling successes like Everest, secure the United Kingdom's global status. Others realised that the United Kingdom's waning power was terminal and advocated shedding its imperial clothing and donning instead the post-imperial robes befitting of a leader of a coalition of Commonwealth countries. In the Cold War context, it was also thought that the United Kingdom's Commonwealth credentials offered a useful alternative to US cultural diplomacy (Davies, 2013: 298).

Echoing this post-colonial identity crisis, the United Kingdom's presentation of its Everest conquest oscillated between two contradictory sets of images. Sometimes Everest was used to articulate images of the United Kingdom as a modern, forward-looking, technologically advanced nation capable of cutting-edge innovation whose achievements were a beacon for humankind. Mastering Everest was proof that the United Kingdom remained a leading power, undiminished by a shrinking Empire and standing on the cusp of a new Elizabethan Age where it would act as the benign head of a kaleidoscope of Commonwealth nations. Exhibits at the Vienna International Trade Fair, with Everest and the British companies that made it possible as the centrepiece, plus the emphasis in the Everest film on the scientific testing of equipment at the RAF Institute of Aviation Medicine, reinforced these images. The expedition team best embodies the metaphor, however. The members were overwhelmingly British, but this was a team that carried the UN flag alongside the Union Jack and in which a New Zealander and a Tibetan claimed the glory of the final ascent. As Hunt put it, Hillary and Tenzing, 'representing, in a sense, members of the Commonwealth, had been successful in getting to the top. It was only right and proper' (RGS, 1953a). Describing the expedition's reception in India, the UK High Commissioner revealed:

[T]he President remarked to Colonel Hunt that the ascent of the mountain had touched a depth of feeling that is seldom reached among the Indian people, and it has been brought home to them that this was a joint achievement of Britons and Asians. (TNA, 1953b)

The planning of post-Everest events gave this careful consideration. For example, the 'tarmac party' that saluted the returning climbers included the UK High Commissioners for New Zealand and India, plus the Nepalese Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Following an irksome quarrel about who reached the summit first (see below), the British government made extraordinary efforts to incorporate Tenzing in the celebrations (TNA, 1953c). In addition to covering the cost of the trip for him and his family (TNA, 1953e), the Cabinet Office also arranged invitations to the Royal Garden Party for 'Tensing [sic] and his wife and two daughters (although they are under 18 – a great relaxation of Palace protocol)' (TNA, 1953a).

Concurrently, the Everest ascent was communicated as the culmination of an exercise that legitimised imperial values. Expedition accounts emphasise how its success owed to characteristics associated with Empire: fortitude, pluck, amateurism, leadership and the flair for dealing with 'native' races (Stewart, 1995). The sherpas were resentful of their treatment as inferiors (Ortner, 1999), typified in 1953 when the main climbing team was quartered inside the British Embassy in Kathmandu but the sherpas billeted in an outbuilding. These simmering tensions erupted into outright rancour when it was announced Hunt and Hillary would receive knighthoods but Tenzing only the George Medal, the highest civilian award for gallantry. The papers relating to this decision have not been released, but uncertainty surrounding Tenzing's nationality seems to have limited the honours the United Kingdom could bestow or that other countries, most notably India who wished to commandeer him as their own and now repudiated the British honours system, would allow (Hansen, 2000: 313–314). Churchill's answer to a parliamentary question on the matter where he states that the outcome 'does not rest entirely with Her Majesty's Government' (quoted in Hansen, 2000: 314) corroborates this interpretation. Irrespective, the lingering suspicion of discrimination reinforced negative stereotypes about the United Kingdom that are likely to have induced soft 'disempowerment' (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018).

Alternative enactments of the Everest ascent by other nations dovetailed with these negative images. Government officials in Wellington, Kathmandu and New Delhi were just as keen as their British counterparts to siphon soft power from the 1953 expedition. They too were at historical inflection points and feted their returning climbers in an attempt to present Everest as a national accomplishment. This spilt over into a chain of unseemly spats, most outwardly about who had first trodden on the summit. As was standard practice at the time, Hillary and Tenzing were roped together to reduce their chances of falling. In effect, they climbed together but one of them would have been ahead as the summit approached. There is minimal doubt that Hillary was first to the summit, but in the immediate aftermath Indian and Nepalese nationalists itched to say otherwise. As the expedition journeyed back to Kathmandu, journalists and village reception committees accosted it. Here, the illiterate Tenzing was browbeaten into signing documents certifying his nationality, something of which he had no concept, and that he had beaten Hillary to the top. Hurriedly, British officials stepped in to broker the form of words used by Hillary and Tenzing in a joint statement that 'we reached the summit almost together' (RGS, 1953e). An exasperated Summerhayes, who was also editing Hillary's articles for *The Times* to dodge further controversy, wrote:

[T]here had been inevitable exaggerations of the role of Tensing, due to nationalism and to jealousy about [the] Indian claim on him. Second point was not our affair, but ignorant nationalists made trouble about unimportant details as to who actually [sic] reached the summit first . . . the expedition subsequently agreed on formula which spoke in vague and generous terms of the final roles near the summit. (TNA, 1953e)

These disputes, plus conspiracy theories concocted by Indian nationalists that the entire tale was a fraud, depleted the FCO's soft power dividend.

Conclusion

When asked 'why climb Everest?' George Mallory, one of the trailblazing climbers who vanished mysteriously on the mountain in 1924, is reputed to have quipped 'because it is there' (*The New York Times*, 1923).⁶ However, mountaineering is noteworthy in the sport and soft power literature, because it is not. This omission is surprising because between 1920 and 1960 states requisitioned mountains and mountaineers in 'a global struggle for prestige . . . the highest mountains on earth became symbols of status and achievement . . . the largest expeditions ever assembled became displays of national power' (BBC Four, 2015). Italy with K2 and Germany with Nanga Parbet (Hobusch, 2002) had their own mountaineering infatuations, but nothing matched the majesty of Everest. After the inaugural ascent, Everest lost some of its lustre, but even leading states craved the soft power benefits of its conquest (Unsworth, 2000: 394). The comprehensive government support lent to the 1963 US expedition connoted its priority with James Ramsey Ullman, a leading mountaineering author of the time observing that success will 'be a booster to our prestige, a refutation beyond argument of our detractors' taunt that we are a nation gone soft' (quoted in Isserman and Weaver, 2008: 357). Whereas the American expedition sought to underscore the attractiveness of free economies and societies, the first ascents of China (1960) and the Soviet Union (1982) evinced those of the 'bureaucratized rationality of a modern industrialised society' (Isserman and Weaver, 2008: 344). Similarly, Everest is habitually intertwined with the razzmatazz surrounding mega-events. The

Olympic torch went via the summit en route to Beijing in 2008 and a gold medal awarded to members of the 1922 expedition was taken to the summit as part of the publicity for the London Games.

The Everest case study highlights several issues germane to the debate on soft power and the more specific discussion of sport and soft power in the United Kingdom. Whereas it is customarily claimed that sport was an imperceptible part of the FCO diplomatic repertoire prior to the 2012 Olympics, this article demonstrates that its engagement with sport has a noticeably longer lineage and is 'a significant, albeit overlooked . . . instrument for communicating a range of messages about Britain to a global audience' (Beck, 2005: 182). This is not to say that Everest kept the nocturnal lanterns of the FCO ablaze, that the FCO possessed a codified sports diplomacy strategy or that all FCO officials overcame their scepticism about the value of projecting an attractive image (Beloff, 1965). Rather, this article adds to the evidence that there was, for much of the 20th century, a cadre of foreign policy officials who were cognisant of, and proactively pushed, sport as a 'politically usable resource' (Beck, 2008: 624).

This article also highlights the need to broaden the research agenda beyond mega-events to consider other ways in which sport can contribute to soft power. In the UK context, this might include greater examination of whether and how its image is enhanced by being home to iconic sports stars, teams, venues and competitions, influencing participation in sport and shaping the decision-making in global sports organisations.

The current context for soft power is unmistakably different to the 1950s. Nevertheless, the Everest case study contains lessons for the battalions of foreign policymakers for whom maximising soft power is intrinsic to their everyday roles. First, it reaffirms the importance of credibility to the production of soft power resources. Recipients may otherwise dismiss messages originating from governments as propaganda, thus draining their soft power effects. Conversely, credibility is enhanced if the image's initiator is perceived to be at one remove from state agencies. A second related lesson is that allowing civil society actors greater latitude brings credibility but slackens control over the image being projected. In the aftermath of the Everest ascent, attempts to massage the United Kingdom's image were entrusted primarily to non-state actors. The RGS and their representatives did gallantly, but gaffes, including jaundiced statements about the sherpas, tainted the United Kingdom's image and produced instances of soft disempowerment. Third, soft power is most efficacious when a clear and consistent narrative underpins it. Attempts to brand the conquest of Everest as the triumph of an enlightened, post-imperialist power still confident of its place in the world were undermined by simultaneous appeals to it as a vindication of the veracity of colonial institutions and values. Indeed, the Everest case highlights a tension that perennially plagues the United Kingdom's soft power strategy between those who believe the country's past is the key to leveraging its soft power and those who believe the emphasis should be on the present. The Brexit juncture perfectly captures this tension with the attempts to parade the United Kingdom as an 'open, inclusive, outward facing free-trading global power' (HM Government, 2018: 30) being repudiated by those inspired by a toxic nostalgia for the Golden Age of Empire (O'Toole, 2018).⁷ Managing this tension is a central challenge confronting officials responsible for the United Kingdom's post-Brexit public diplomacy.


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Notes

1. After partition in 1947, the India Office, previously responsible for the governance of India, was merged with the Dominions Office into the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO). This department became the Commonwealth Office in 1966 following its amalgamation with Colonial Office. Two years later, the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office were combined to become the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). For the purposes of consistency, this article throughout refers to the FCO.
2. Doing full justice to this material is exceedingly difficult. The magisterial histories of Everest by Unsworth (2000) and the wider Himalaya by Isserman and Weaver (2008) are excellent starting points. Bruce (1923), Davis (2012), Howard-Bury (1922), Hoyland (2013), Norton (1925), Ruttledge (1934, 1936) Tilman (1938), and Younghusband (1926, 1936) provide expositions of the background to, and conduct of, the interwar expeditions. Accounts by members of the 1953 team (Hillary, 1955; Hunt and Hillary, 1953; Lowe, 2013; Morris, 1958; Pugh, 1954; Tenzing and Ullman, 1955) supplement the official record by the expedition leader (Hunt, 1953). Based on newly excavated archive material, Conefrey (2013) and Tuckey (2013) have reappraised the 1953 expedition and its precursors.
3. Indian Office correspondence regarding the interwar expeditions shows the sanctity of this principle. In seeking authorisation for the final pre-war expedition in 1938, the Political Secretary requests his counterpart in Sikkim to approach the Tibetans 'to make this request at such a time as seems most opportune . . . unless of course it would embarrass his political negotiations' (BL, 1936a, emphasis added; see also BL, 1936b).
4. The stipulation that the climbing personnel should be British subjects appeared in the resolutions of the MEC's inaugural meeting (Royal Geographical Society (RGS), 1920). Aside from Dan Bryant, a New Zealander figuring in the 1935 expedition, all interwar climbers were British.
5. See 'Correspondence with the Foreign Office', available in Box 64 of the RGS Everest Archive.
6. This quotation's authenticity is disputed, supposedly given by Mallory to a journalist on his 1923 American lecture tour.
7. Interestingly, the RGS files contain a note declining 'to answer this rather "peculiar" letter' which enquires about the Englishness rather than the Britishness of the expedition (RGS, 1953d).

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